

Methodology of Internal Quality Assurance of the Accreditation Commission Czech Republic

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In compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), the Accreditation Commission Czech Republic (ACCR) laid down procedures for quality assurance of its activities. As for higher education institutions (HEIs), where the ACCR cares for quality of educational activities, it is imperative for the ACCR to formulate a fundamental framework of internal quality assurance and to critically reflect on its activities. The ACCR views internal quality assurance as designing its activities to enable achieving its goals effectively and fulfilling its social role. The goals have been stated in the mission statement of the ACCR and include subgoals resulting from internal evaluation and external review of the ACCR. The methodology of internal quality assurance follows from analysis of the mission of the ACCR and conditions for its achievement.

The Mission of the ACCR and Its Achievement

According to its mission statement, the ACCR is an independent board that deals with quality of higher education and to this end it performs comprehensive evaluation of educational, scholarly, research, artistic or other creative activity of higher education institutions. The ACCR supports state, public and private higher education institutions in their efforts to develop their own inner quality assurance systems that would form the framework for autonomous initiatives fostering high and sustainable level of education and other activities. With respect to academic traditions in the Czech Republic, the ACCR recognizes that higher education institutions and their academic communities are primarily responsible for the quality of teaching and research.

The ACCR carries out its mission through quality assessment and accreditation process of degree programmes. It is inspired by the quality assurance models in the European Higher Education Area where it represents the Czech accreditation system and through which it cooperates with accreditation agencies in other countries. The ACCR acts with a sense of responsibility, openness and transparency of the accreditation and quality assurance processes, taking professionals and representative bodies of higher education institutions as well as representatives of student community as its natural partners. Mutual trust and dialogue represent the key tool in the process of assurance of the high quality in higher education in the Czech Republic.

With respect to reaching the goals, the ACCR identified several aspects of its activities that require special and permanent attention. It is imperative that the ACCR not only adheres to its legal duties and legal norms, but also acts according to its own rules, such as the standards. At the same time, the ACCR maintains independence in the sense of entitlement to create the rules and procedures for its activities. Transparency and openness are among the main principles that form the basis for the work of the ACCR and contribute to the accountability principle. Feedback mechanisms and communication within the ACCR and its working groups as well as with its natural partners (stakeholders) play a key role. Among the basic elements of internal quality assurance is also regular evaluation of significant aspects of the activities of the ACCR and monitoring of their progress over time. Internal evaluation and external review enable reformulation of goals and setting of new goals to improve quality with consideration of findings from critical analysis of activities and changing external conditions. The ACCR has set specific procedures in these areas to improve the quality of its activities and better facilitate achievement of its mission.

Mechanisms of Assurance and Monitoring of Compliance with External and Internal Rules

The ACCR performs its tasks according to the Higher Education Act and its Statute approved by the government. While carrying out its activities, the ACCR adheres to legislative and legal norms and makes effort for maximum possible compliance with the ESG.

The ACCR sets its own procedures and criteria and acts in compliance with them. When assessing applications for accreditation and evaluating HEIs, the ACCR adheres to its **standards and methodical documents**. The standards are applied consistently on the basis of rational consideration and in line with the principle of proceeding similarly in similar cases. The principle of legitimate expectation on the part of HEIs should thus be satisfied. Standards and other documents related to quality assurance of higher education carried out by the ACCR are **regularly revised**. They are updated as needed to reflect the developments in higher education and incorporate experience as well external and internal critical input.

Assessors and evaluators must be thoroughly familiar with the procedures of assessment and evaluation, respectively, and their application. For this purpose, the ACCR has created methodical guidelines and **trains members of permanent and ad-hoc working groups as well as new members of the ACCR**. The training method is selected as needed and training is provided or facilitated by the Secretariat of the ACCR.

The working groups of the ACCR are advisory bodies established in line with the Higher Education Act and the Statute for preparation of the meetings of the ACCR. They are very valuable for the ACCR. The procedures of each working group are stipulated in its rules of procedure that are grounded in the Statute of the ACCR. **“Sample” rules of procedure of permanent working groups** that form the basis for rules of procedure of the working groups upon adjustment for their specific needs has been published in the internal information system of the ACCR.

Pre-screening of received applications for formal errors by the Secretariat of the ACCR contributes to adherence to the requirements on applications. Pre-screening captures formal errors prior to expert assessment of applications in the working groups. Moreover, it leads to speeding up and greater effectiveness of the assessment process. The Secretariat of the ACCR provides **increased administrative and technical support** to those working groups that have the greatest workload related to assessment of applications. In consequence, support of the Secretariat creates better conditions for compliance with formal requirements on applications and lowers the administrative burden on the working groups.

Transparency

Criteria for assessment (standards of the ACCR for study programmes etc.) and methodical guidelines for assessors and evaluators are available to the HEIs as well as the public on the website of the ACCR. Great attention is paid to **publication of outputs** of quality assurance activities. The ACCR publishes minutes from its meetings including statements to applications for accreditation and other assessed matters. The ACCR as a body working in public interest informs the public through its website; significant information is communicated to the public also through the media. Information about which HEIs or their parts have been subject to evaluation and full evaluation reports are also publicly available.

In addition, the ACCR also makes available **reports about its activities**, namely annual reports and internal evaluation reports. In compliance with the requirements of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), also the self-assessment report of the ACCR and final review report from the periodic external review of the ACCR by an international expert panel are published.

The website of the ACCR serves for publication of information. It is maintained with effort to make it as well-arranged, informative and easy to navigate as possible. Significant information and documents are available also in English.

Feedback and Communication

As a part of internal quality assurance, the ACCR defined **the basic line of communication** with its natural partners (stakeholders), mainly with HEIs. The Secretariat of the ACCR provides consultation about formal requirements on applications for accreditation, requirements in the evaluation process and general interpretation of the standards of the ACCR. Secretariat staff members, however, do not state their opinions on content of applications and do not assess compliance or non-compliance with the standards in specific cases. The Secretariat facilitates meetings with the members of the ACCR if requested by the applicants or other persons. The Chair and members of the ACCR and members of the working groups can discuss content of applications and compliance with the standards with applicants, but as a general rule, consultations are not provided before discussion of the applications by the ACCR. Meetings with applicants evolve mainly around conceptual issues, solutions to serious problems in the activities of the HEIs etc. The involved ACCR members or associates inform the Secretariat about all meetings of the members of the ACCR and the working groups with applicants and other parties that have not been organized through the Secretariat. A record of all meetings with HEIs and other parties are kept and maintained by the Secretariat.

Guests **attend the meetings of the ACCR** according to the Statute of the ACCR. Representatives of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports and representations of HEIs are regularly invited; representatives of applicants for state approval to operate as a private HEI and of applicants in the case of establishment, merger, breaking up and closure of faculties are also invited. When conclusions and recommendations of evaluation of a HEI or its part are discussed, the representatives of the HEI or its part attend the meeting. In other cases not explicitly referred to in the Statute of the ACCR, possible invitation of guests is decided by the ACCR. The Secretary-General of the ACCR may invite additional guests on behalf of the Chair of the ACCR.

Members and associates of the ACCR including members of permanent and ad-hoc working groups follow **the Code of Ethics of the ACCR** in their activities in quality assurance of higher education. The Code of Ethics emphasizes the principles of objectivity, transparency, professionalism, responsibility, personal integrity and independence and rules out any influence related to conflict of interests, corruption and discrimination. It also applies on staff members of the Secretariat, who are subject to the Code of Ethics of Employees in Public Administration.

The ACCR receives feedback on its activities from its members and associates as well as natural partners (stakeholders). **The feedback mechanism** is set to obtain feedback from the members of the ACCR and its working groups every three years. It focuses on the quality of conditions for expert activities of the ACCR (i.e. composition of the working groups, training of members of the ACCR and the working groups). The mechanism creates space for input towards improvement of activities, adjustment of criteria and methodologies etc., while emphasizing good practice to be further built on.

The ACCR seeks feedback from its natural partners (stakeholders) with the same periodicity. This feedback offers insight into their perception of the activities of the ACCR and mutual cooperation. Formal feedback is obtained within the set mechanism mainly by survey. In addition, **communication between the ACCR and key partners takes place regularly**. Representatives of the representations of HEIs take part in all meetings of the ACCR; representatives of the ACCR speak at meetings of the representations of HEIs.

The ACCR also regularly (every year if possible) analyses appeals from HEIs (mainly responses to statements of the ACCR and remonstrance against accreditation decisions of the ministry). The analysis points to weak spots and errors in statements and helps prevent deficiencies in the future.

Findings of analyses of feedback from partners (stakeholders) and feedback in the form of appeals of HEIs translate into internal evaluation of the ACCR and adjustment of standards and procedures.

Internal Evaluation and External Review

It is the duty of the ACCR, according to the Statute, to submit **annual reports** to the ministry. The reports comprise of an analytical part, a part with data on the activities and finally a report on financial matters as an annex. Annual reports are created by the Secretariat of the ACCR.

In compliance with the ESG, the ACCR carries out regular **internal evaluation** that focuses on methods of internal quality assurance and measures to facilitate achievement of subgoals leading to fulfilling the mission of the ACCR. Internal evaluation provides space for critical reflection on the activities of the ACCR and monitoring of progress over time through analysis of compliance with recommendations and steps outlined in previous evaluations. It is based on direct connection to previous evaluations and captures continuous fulfilment of own recommendations as well as recommendations made by the expert panel in external review. Obstacles to successful implementation of some measures are also pointed out. Internal evaluation is carried out and reports are created, with support from the Secretariat, by a committee appointed from among the members of the ACCR every year.

In internal evaluation, continuity of gradual fulfilment of recommendations formulated by the ACCR in previous internal evaluations as well as those issued by the international expert panel is crucial. At the same time however, the ACCR needs to pose questions that will be subject of deeper analysis in the given period; these can include communication with partners (stakeholders), appeals by HEIs against statements of the ACCR, quality of assessment by the ACCR and its working groups etc. The procedures of internal evaluation and structure of the reports must give space for both approaches. Utmost openness, capability of critical self-reflection and ability to work with strengths and weaknesses are key in internal evaluation.

The basic structure of internal evaluation:

1. Setting of goals and context of internal evaluation (connection to previous internal evaluations, relationship to internal evaluation, focus of internal evaluation in the given period)
2. Analysis of progress on tasks and recommendations from previous internal evaluations
3. Analysis of progress on tasks and recommendations from the last external review
4. Deeper analysis of specific aspects of the activities of the ACCR
5. Drawing of conclusions and recommendations

The ACCR undergoes **external review** of compliance with the ESG every five years; successful external review is a condition for membership in ENQA and international recognition of the ACCR as a quality assurance agency as well as of outputs from its activities. An international panel of trained experts evaluates the activities of the ACCR through analysis of its self-assessment report and a site visit of several days. Self-assessment is carried out and the self-assessment report is drafted, with support from the Secretariat, by a committee appointed by the ACCR. Other members of the ACCR, members of the working groups and partners (stakeholders) are also involved in the self-assessment process.

The Relationship between Internal Evaluation and External Review:

Internal quality assurance entails creating of the ACCR's own internal mechanisms to monitor and assess the quality of its activities. Internal evaluation, therefore, constitutes an important mechanism of internal quality assurance and serves mainly to set subgoals that enable achieving the mission of the ACCR and gradual steps towards reaching them. Internal evaluation also forms the basis for external review, particularly for drafting the self-assessment report. Self-assessment allows the ACCR to capture its development in a longer time span than internal evaluation; it is also a more complex process in terms of extent as well as involvement of various actors. Review by international experts in quality assurance of higher education, then, provides the ACCR with a critical outlook on its activities in the international perspective. The expert panel, furthermore, evaluates the internal quality assurance mechanisms. The ACCR is aware that critical, analytical, realistic and open internal evaluation and self-assessment for external review are key for improving the quality of its activities. It is in no way a formal matter. Conclusions and recommendations from the two evaluation processes lead to tangible measures that must translate into everyday operations of the ACCR.